

Part I. Ready Schools



To the National Education Goals Panel, ensuring that children start school ready to learn is vitally important. But ensuring that schools are ready for children is important as well. Recognizing that good education means both ready children and ready schools, the Goals Panel convened a special group of advisors and asked them to identify what makes a ready school. This report, Ready Schools, is the result of their efforts. It recommends ten specific approaches found in successful elementary schools and documented by research to be keys to ready schools.

Some four million children enter our nation's kindergartens each year. All of them have, as their birthright, an active curiosity and a capacity to learn. Virtually all of them come to school with a lively intellect that, under the right conditions, can be supported, strengthened, and developed so that they can grasp essential skills and knowledge taught in school and make sense of their world. Readiness to learn continuously, to adapt to change, and to construct meaning would seem to be a natural endowment—the hallmark of human experience. And yet, concern in our nation about this capacity is so intense and so widespread that the first of our National Education Goals seeks to ensure that all of our children will enter school “ready to learn.”

Focus on Children's Readiness

Among those expressing the deepest concern are the people who know the children best. Many parents fear that their children are starting school unprepared for the tasks that await them. Kindergarten teachers are also concerned, telling researchers that a significant number of the children entering elementary school are not ready to learn in their classrooms. In different studies, estimates range from 10 percent to more than 30 percent.¹

In 1990, the President and state Governors reflected these concerns by setting as the first National Education Goal that: “By the year 2000, all children in America

will start school ready to learn.” They established a National Education Goals Panel to measure progress toward this and the other National Education Goals. The Goals Panel convened distinguished early childhood leaders from across the country to help the Panel identify how it would define “ready children,” and the qualities it would seek in selecting data to measure progress toward Goal 1.

Though some in the past defined “readiness” primarily as readiness to learn to read, the prevailing view today, endorsed by the National Education Goals Panel, is that readiness to learn hinges on a range of factors, including a child’s health and physical development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning; language and communicative skills; and cognition and general knowledge. Efforts to improve school readiness, therefore, begin long before children enroll in kindergarten. They begin with efforts to support families, educate parents, expand access to health care, and raise the quality of early care and education. Getting all children to start—and continue—school “ready to learn” is a shared responsibility of all adults and institutions in a community.

But acknowledging our shared responsibilities to ready children for school does not also let elementary schools off the hook to make themselves ready for children. In fact, to a greater extent than ever before, elementary school leaders are *on the hook*. School leaders are being asked to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning that goes on in their classrooms, as well as to build bridges over the moats that too often have separated schools from the other places where early learning takes place: the home, a wide range of out-of-home early care and education settings, and the community. The Goals Panel recognizes that strengthening achievement requires not only getting children ready for school, but also getting schools ready for the particular children they serve.

Getting Schools Ready for Children

The Goals Panel therefore convened advisors to form a Ready Schools Resource Group and asked them to delineate the essential attributes of a “ready school.” While other efforts are now under way to determine how we can better prepare *young children* to enter our schools, this report asks: How can we prepare *schools* to receive our children? How can we make sure that schools are ready for the children and families who are counting on them? And how can we create schools that consistently raise student achievement to levels of excellence?

This report suggests broad strategies that school and community leaders may want to consider as they work to strengthen the transition to school and learning in kindergarten through Grade 3. Although it does not represent a full review of research or practice in this vast field, the report builds upon a body of work that has already been done.

A number of efforts deserve mention. Two reports by the National Association of State Boards of Education provided a framework for group discussion of key issues in early childhood education: *Right from the Start: The Report of the NASBE Task Force on Early Childhood Education*,² and *Caring Communities: Supporting Young Children and Families*.³ Ernest Boyer's *The Basic School* identified key elements of effective elementary schools.⁴ Boyer described a community that has a defined mission and purpose, where teachers are leaders and parents are partners, where the curriculum meets children's needs and provides coherence, and where the climate fosters learning and character development. The Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades issued a report called *Years of Promise: A Comprehensive Learning Strategy for America's Children*, which articulates cross-cutting principles that schools and other institutions can follow to strengthen both early care and education and schooling in the primary grades.⁵ *It's Elementary*, a report on the elementary grades by the California Department of Education, also outlined what an outstanding elementary school might look like and made recommendations for realizing that vision.⁶

This report reflects discussion by the Ready Schools Resource Group of the approaches that a variety of effective schools already use to get their children off to a good start. Many kinds of schools—with diverse philosophies, aims, and approaches—effectively challenge and serve the children who enter them. In some communities, adopting such practices will take more aggressive change efforts than in others, but all ready schools recognize the unique needs of young children and aim to optimize their development and learning.

The discussions that led to this report reflected a shared conviction that schools alone cannot produce students who meet world-class standards; parents and communities share responsibility for this as well. But schools have a bottom-line responsibility for helping children succeed. Working together, all who shape education policy or work in classrooms need to serve every child who comes to school. Their success is our collective responsibility.

The Goal 1 Ready Schools Resource Group suggests ten key principles that communities can take into account as they prepare schools to receive their children.